

Pathways to Graduation: Supporting All Students to Mastery

A Retrospective Look at the Class of 2003



Policy Brief: Spring 2004

Overview. June 2004 marks the one-year inception of the Commonwealth's Alternate Pathways to Success initiative. As policymakers and education leaders consider the effectiveness of Massachusetts' pathways policy and next steps in its continued development, they must evaluate the extent to which its original goal was accomplished – creating a safety net to support all students to mastery. The Commonwealth has made a good start at providing pathway supports but more must be done to strengthen and build a comprehensive pathways system. In this brief, we begin to identify ways in which this system requires improvement, including:

- More data on eligible students and an improved student tracking system;
 - Better alignment of existing needs and available services;
 - Better coordination of resources, programs and providers;
 - Greater clarification of service provider roles and responsibilities;
 - More program evaluation and focus on providing equitable access to pathway options; and
 - Better communication, especially to students and the counselors who advise them.
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Introduction

The aspirations of the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act are ambitious, but clear -- to provide every student with an opportunity to learn and achieve mastery at a high standard of academic proficiency. Since the legislation's passage, considerable time, effort, and resources have been dedicated to achieving this lofty goal, and substantial progress has been made toward providing *all* Massachusetts students with a high quality education. The state has dedicated significant resources and effort to fulfill its commitment through a variety of programs and solutions, but despite this success and clear commitment, more must be done before the ultimate goal is fully met. With the institution of high stakes testing, the Commonwealth assumed an additional, critical responsibility -- an obligation to provide ongoing academic support to students still needing to meet the competency standard and graduate. While the Commonwealth and Department of Education (DOE) might easily have ignored this responsibility, they should be commended for their efforts to support these students. However, more must be done. As they continue in their efforts to meet this responsibility and address the diverse learning needs of Massachusetts students, the Commonwealth and its educational leaders must continue to institute a system that effectively identifies, recruits, and supports students requiring additional time and academic assistance to earn a competency determination.

To raise public awareness and generate discussion on the topic of student pathways to graduation, the Rennie Center sponsored a public event in March 2003. Speakers representing the state, higher education, school districts, community partners, and students referenced initiatives in progress and the need for continued, deepened efforts to ensure the development of a multi-tiered, diverse safety-net of pathway options. A year later, the Rennie Center remains committed to ensuring that the Commonwealth has developed and implemented effective student pathways for the Class of 2003 and subsequent senior classes. To inform further discourse, the Rennie Center has conducted a preliminary review of data available through the DOE on the Commonwealth's pathway options for members of the Class of 2003. While other Massachusetts researchers are conducting multi-year assessments on district-level remediation efforts and their impact, this report focuses, specifically, on how well the Commonwealth has served members of the Class of 2003 who did not pass MCAS by addressing the following questions:

- Who were the members of the Class of 2003 requiring pathways programming support?
- Which programs were implemented to serve these students' needs, and who was served?
- What more must be done to strengthen a pathways system for students?

While an incomplete picture remains, we believe that it is critical to communicate available data in a timely fashion and with an independent voice to ensure that necessary changes and adaptations can be made prior to graduation June 2004, when another group of seniors will require pathways support. Given the limited scope of this brief, we draw attention to the many data gaps that exist and multitude of questions still needing to be addressed. We hope that this report will advance the practice and policy discussion and encourage the Commonwealth's leadership and educators to continue the systemic development of academic pathway options for all of Massachusetts' students.

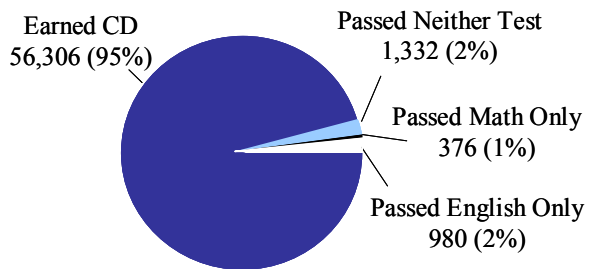
Who were members of the Class of 2003 requiring pathways programming support?

Spring 2004: The current situation. The Commonwealth continues to make progress in supporting students from the Class of 2003 who have not yet earned a competency determination. As of February 2004 when the November 2003 retest results were released, the vast majority (95%) of students from the Class of 2003, had passed the 10th grade MCAS exam. While this success has been and should be applauded, it is important to note that a total of 2,688 students still have not demonstrated mastery of the competency standard.¹

For students not passing the MCAS, districts could submit a performance appeal to the DOE on students' behalf, requesting that the MCAS requirement be waived and a competency determination granted. As of September 2003, districts had submitted 2,466 appeals - of which, 423 English and 769 mathematics appeals were granted. Between October and November 2003, another 32 appeals were filed for students in the Class of 2003.

There is no precise count of how many students from the Class of 2003 did not graduate in June 2003 solely because they did not pass the 10th grade MCAS exam. While many students had fulfilled all local graduation requirements and were prevented from graduation due to MCAS failure, others actually passed MCAS but did not receive diplomas because they failed to meet local graduation requirements. We do not have sufficient data to determine how many of the 2,688 students still in need of a competency determination would not have graduated because they did not fulfill local graduation requirements. In other words, it is currently impossible to ascertain exactly how many students were prevented from graduating solely because of their MCAS failure.

Students in the Class of 2003 Who Have Earned a Competency Determination¹
(as of 2/04) (N=58,994)



Districts were given the option to award certificates of attainment to students who had fulfilled all other local graduation requirements but neither passed the MCAS nor received a performance appeal. The DOE reports that at the conclusion of the 2002-03 school year, districts had awarded 1,543 certificates of attainment. As of October 1, 2004, the DOE reports that an additional 67 certificates of attainment had been awarded. We do not know how many districts chose to issue certificates and how many did not. Because not all districts chose to award certificates of attainment, we know that between 1,543 and 2,688 students would have been eligible to graduate if they had earned a competency determination.

Spring 2003: The situation when pathways programs were being created. It is important to describe the circumstances around the Commonwealth's development of its pathways initiative. Prior to the Class of 2003's actual graduation, the state was required to estimate, for the first time, the number of students needing ongoing academic support to meet the competency standard. Consequently, the DOE designed the pathways initiative with far less information than is currently available. We do know that, prior to the release of the May 2003 MCAS retest results, 90 percent (54,684) of the Commonwealth's seniors had earned their competency determination, and a remaining 10 percent (6,058) still needed to pass one or both of the MCAS exams. Because it was believed that many of those 6,058 students had passed the May 2003 retest (results were not released until September 2003), significant controversy surrounded the projected need for pathways programming. Furthermore, establishing a true count of students requiring pathways support was additionally problematic given complications with tracking student mobility and attrition.

Despite outstanding population questions, we are able to identify with relative certainty which student groups were most in need of continuing academic support and pathways programming in June 2003 – students classified as special education, limited English proficient (LEP), non-White, and urban residents². The following table details students in the Class of 2003, by selected subgroup, who had achieved their competency determination prior graduation in 2003.

¹ This total does not include the 1,248 members of the Class of 2003 who have been reclassified as part of the Class of 2004. Students were reclassified if they were included in October 1st 2003 enrollment reports because they had not fulfilled all local graduation requirements. Students were reclassified irrespective of whether they had earned a competency determination, thus it is likely that some of these 1,248 students had passed the MCAS or been granted a performance appeal. As an aside, approximately, 65 percent of these students (813) earned their competency determination prior to the November 2003 retest.

² Urban districts defined as members of the Urban Superintendent's Association. (Source: DOE)

Competency Determination Results for Class of 2003 by Selected Sub-Group

	Gr. 12 Enrollment	% Passing ELA	% Passing Math	# Earning CD	% Earning CD
All Students	60,742	94%	91%	54,684	90%
Student Status					
Limited English Proficient	2,615	72%	77%	1,746	67%
Students w/ Disabilities	7,292	79%	72%	5,025	69%
Regular Education	50,835	97%	95%	47,913	94%
Race/Ethnicity					
African-American/ Black	4,984	83%	79%	3,748	75%
Asian	2,888	93%	93%	2,605	90%
Hispanic	4,820	80%	75%	3,362	70%
Native American	173	93%	91%	157	91%
White	47,877	96%	94%	44,812	94%
Gender					
Female	30,859	94%	92%	27,978	91%
Male	29,883	93%	91%	26,706	89%
Vocational Technical					
	12,005	93%	88%	10,347	86%
Region					
Urban	15,092	85%	82%	11,872	79%
Non-Urban	45,650	96%	95%	42,812	94%

(Table does not include May 2003 retest results)

Which programs were implemented to serve these students' needs, and who was served?

In this section we provide a rough overview of:

- The types of pathways programs that exist, their goals, and their programmatic offerings;
- The scope of their funding and regional presence;
- Their potential student capacity, enrollment, and rate of attrition; and
- The extent to which students served by different programs retook and passed the MCAS exam.

Acknowledging the Commonwealth's obligation to provide ongoing academic support to members of the Class of 2003 and beyond who have not passed the 10th grade MCAS assessment, the state has made progress toward instituting a series of supports for these students. Funding for a diverse range of pathways programs has been made available by the Department of Education under the umbrella of its "*Alternate Pathways to Success*" initiative. Funding for pathways programming supplements additional academic support and MCAS remediation grants from the DOE, targeting high school students who have been identified based on their poor performance on the 10th grade MCAS. Although DOE has offered MCAS support and remediation to students at multiple grade levels, discussion below is limited only to pathways programming that specifically targets 12th grade students from the Class of 2003 who did not earn competency determinations prior to graduation in June 2003.

However, it is important to note, that in addition to pathways programs detailed below, some seniors who did not graduate were served in the Summer of 2003 by district-led summer programs funded through the Academic Support Services Program (fund code 625). In FY2003, the Commonwealth provided approximately \$15.8 million through this grant stream to fund 810 programs run by 210 districts, serving students in grades 3-12. Of this money, approximately \$480,000 was granted to programs providing academic support to students in grades 9-12. These programs did not specifically target seniors who had not graduated; however, the DOE estimates that approximately 411 seniors who failed to earn a competency determination were enrolled in programs offered by 18 districts during the summer of 2003.

Pathway initiatives are diverse in their design, operation, and purpose and are difficult to disaggregate by discrete program focus. To simplify the presentation of collected data within this policy brief, we have adopted the Department of Education's protocol of classifying pathway programs by their fund code title: a) One stop career centers; b) Innovative programs; and c) Academic support and community college transition services.

These pathways programs provide different combinations of academic and related supports, some of which include:

- Targeted MCAS remediation;
- Developmental education;
- Online tutoring;
- Workplace learning;
- Transitional placement at community colleges;
- ESL tutoring; and
- Job placement and career development.

Pathways programs have been implemented by a wide range of service providers, including: districts, community colleges, local workforce investment boards, non-profits, and other community agencies. There is no clear distinction as to which type of organization will be awarded a grant under a specific fund code. In many instances, one service provider may receive multiple grants under the DOE's three different funding streams, and with each grant, provide a range of different, though possibly related programs. In other instances, a service provider may act as the fiscal agent for a group of organizations that are partnering to provide students with a set of supports.

Data in this brief has been gathered in collaboration with the DOE. Information pertaining to program capacity, enrollment, program attrition, MCAS test-taking and MCAS pass rates has been amassed by the DOE from initial grant proposals and concluding evaluations submitted by programs' service providers. Because the DOE has not yet fully collated data for 2003 nor received information on 2003-2004 school year programming, we cannot provide a complete data picture within this brief. However, in the future, policymakers, educational leaders, and researchers must seek answers to these data gaps so they are able to assess the impact and effectiveness of pathways programs.

1. One Stop Career Centers

Target. Class of 2003 (until June 2004); Classes 2003 and 2004 (beginning in Summer 2004 onwards)

Program Overview. One Stop Career Centers function as an umbrella effort to gather and disseminate information about pathways options to post-12th grade students who must still earn a competency determination. One Stop Centers broker services offered by community colleges, high schools, and community-based organizations and match students with appropriate education support services (i.e., remediation in ELA and Math), training, and employment opportunities. In addition, One Stop Centers help students with career exploration, resume writing, interviewing skill development, job search support, occupational field trips and links to occupational training. There is no cost for services provided by One Stop Career Centers, and students qualifying for Title I assistance are eligible for childcare and travel reimbursements.

Program Funding. To date, \$1,300,000 has been awarded for programming in the summers 2003 and 2004 (fund code 626) and 2003-2004 school year (fund code 627). In the summer of 2003, funding was administered on a contract basis. Funding for summer programming has been reduced by 81 percent between 2003 and 2004.

Service Providers. One Stop Career Centers are operated primarily by regional community agencies, workforce investment and employment boards. In the Summer of 2003, 9 regional grant recipients operated 16 centers. During the 2003-2004 school year, 8 regional grant recipients operated 13 centers. In the Summer of 2004, there will be 7 regional grant recipients operating 12 centers.

One Stop Career Center Grants

One Stop Career Centers Grant Recipients	Summer 2003	School Year 2003/2004	Summer 2004	% Change Summer 2003 vs. 2004
Boston Private Industry Council	130,000	149,202	29,841	(77)
Bristol Workforce Investment Board	59,000	44,015	4,470	(92)
Brockton Area Workforce Investment Board	56,347	44,039	14,295	(75)
Franklin Hampshire Career Center	66,449	40,061	28,271	(57)
Greater New Bedford Workforce Investment Board	60,000	47,825	12,175	(80)
Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board	60,000	--	--	(100)
Regional Employment Board of Hampden County	98,204	99,914	20,086	(80)
The Career Place	60,000	60,000	--	(100)
Valley Works Career Center	60,000	43,883	11,923	(80)
TOTAL STATE FUNDS	\$650,000	\$528,939	\$121,061	(81)

Students Served by One Stop Career Centers³

	Summer 2003	School Year 2003-2004	Summer 2004
Student Capacity (#)⁴	1,628	1,475	TBD
Formal Enrollment (#)	1,136	855	865 (projected)
Students Served by Program (#)	1,136 ⁵	855	TBD
Students Taking MCAS Retest (#)	239	TBD	TBD
Students Passing MCAS Retest (#)	93 (39%)	10 ⁶	TBD

2. Innovative Programs

Target. Class of 2003 (during Summer of 2003); Classes 2003, 2004, and 2005 (beginning in Fall 2003 onwards)

Program Overview. During the summer of 2003, Innovative Programs grants were awarded to provide quality innovative and intensive instruction in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math to post-12th students in need of a competency determination. This work was conducted through online tutorial services, work and learning models, and community college models.

After the summer, grant eligibility changed in a few ways. Post-12th graders were no longer the only student group receiving services, which have now been expanded to include any student in need of a competency determination. Programmatic focus changed also, with a decreased emphasis on online tutorials and increased priority given to programs providing: career exploration and services (resume writing, interviewing, skill development, job search), brokered employment, field trips, and occupational training (during school year programming only).

Many of the Innovative Program grants were awarded to Work and Learning programs, which are specifically geared toward meeting the needs of students who seek to earn money and gain job skills while they take classes and/or receive academic support. The DOE estimates that there are 250 Massachusetts employers currently involved with local agencies that offer some type of Work and Learning program with MCAS support as its primary focus.

Program Funding. To date, \$2,060,317 has been awarded for programming in the summers 2003 and 2004 (fund code 597) and 2003-2004 school year (fund code 596). Participating employers have subsidized Work and Learning program costs by paying student stipends. In some of Boston's work and learning programs, state and private investment has been estimated as equivalent. Innovative programs have received the largest and most consistent quantity of pathways funding.

Service Provider. Service providers for Innovative programs include a broad range of entities including districts, community colleges, vocational schools, and regional workforce investment boards and private industry councils. Increasingly, Innovative Program grants have been awarded to Work and Learning programs. During the summer of 2003, a total of 17 Innovative Program grants were awarded to service 14 geographic regions; eight of these 17 grants were awarded to Work and Learning programs. During the 2003-2004 school year, a total of 18 Innovative Program grants were awarded across 13 regions; ten of these were for Work and Learning programs. For the summer of 2004, twelve Innovative Program grants have been awarded to service eight regions that are primarily urban; ten of these grants were for Work and Learning programs.

Students Served by Innovative Programs

	Summer 2003	School Year 2003-2004	Summer 2004
Program Capacity (#)	TBD ⁷	TBD	TBD
Enrollment (#)	TBD	65 – Class of 2003	15 (projected)
Students Completing Program (#)	TBD	65	TBD
Attrition (%)	TBD	TBD	TBD
Students Taking MCAS Retest (#)	TBD	TBD	TBD
Students Passing MCAS Retest (#)	TBD	15	TBD

³ Because One Stop services are offered discretely rather than over time, attrition data is not applicable and has not been included. (Source: DOE)

⁴ Student capacity is defined as the number of exiting 12th grade students identified to be in need of One Stop Career Services (Source: DOE)

⁵ 531 students were placed (47%) (Source: DOE)

⁶ There are 4 regions that are still investigating the outcomes of retest results. (Source: DOE)

⁷ TBD indicates areas in which the DOE could not provide data. In some instances, this data has been collected by the DOE, but has not been compiled. In other instances, this data does not exist because reported activity is in the future (e.g., the number of students participating in Summer 2004 programming who have taken and passed the Summer 2004 MCAS retest). We have chosen to include tables with many TBD listings to demonstrate the gap in existing data and the importance of releasing data pertaining to Summer 2004 programming.

Innovative Programs Grant Recipients

Recipient	Summer 2003 (\$)	School Year 2003/2004 (\$)	Summer 2004 (\$)	Total (\$)
Adams-Cheshire Regional School District		10,600		10,600
Anti-Displacement Project (Springfield)	20,000			20,000
Attleboro Public Schools			25,698	25,698
Berkshire Hills Regional School District			10,205	10,205
Boston Private Industry Council	151,130	191,917	171,119	514,166
Bristol Community College		42,659		42,659
Bristol Workforce Investment Board	118,247			118,247
Brockton Public Schools	52,200	89,500	42,700	184,400
Cape Cod Community College	30,578	55,000		85,578
Cape Cod Regional Technical High School		12,000		12,000
Chelsea Public Schools	2,350			2,350
Chicopee Public Schools			68,043	68,043
Gateway Regional School District		7,025		7,025
Greater Fall River School to Career Partnership			114,403	114,403
Greater Lawrence Regional Vocational Technical School	45,000			45,000
Greater New Bedford Workforce Investment Board			19,170	19,170
Haverhill Public Schools	8,384			8,384
Holyoke Community College	81,151	100,000		181,151
Holyoke Public Schools	33,000			33,000
Labb Collaborative Programs	15,000			15,000
Lawrence Public Schools	32,610			32,610
Lynn Public Schools	86,451	27,384		113,835
Montachusett Regional Voc. Technical School District		15,000		15,000
Northborough/Southborough Regional School District		5,000		5,000
Palmer Public Schools			14,755	14,755
Provincetown Public Schools		4,220	550	4,770
Quincy Public Schools	17,000		18,800	35,800
Ralph C. Mahar Regional School District	4,430			4,430
Salem Public Schools		20,000		20,000
Smarthinking (Assabet Valley Regional Voc. Tech. HS)	13,800			13,800
Somerville Public Schools		11,000		11,000
Springfield Public Schools			94,152	94,152
Taunton Area School to Career, Inc.		42,980		42,980
Upper Cape Cod Regional Technical School		21,120		21,120
Westfield Public Schools		15,000		15,000
Worcester Public Schools	30,000	76,245	23,755	130,000
TOTAL	\$710,317	\$746,650	\$603,350	\$2,060,317

3. Academic Support and Community College Transition Services

Target. Members of Class of 2003

Program Overview. Students taking part in academic support programs at the community colleges have chosen to continue to pursue a competency determination at educational institutions that also provide them with programs and pathways that prepare them for careers. The primary focus of the academic support programs (generally 90 percent) continues to be specific MCAS preparation in Math and English Language Arts. In addition, students become familiar with courses, certificates, and associate degree programs that provide pathways to future careers. In preparation for these opportunities, students can take the AccuPlacer assessment and from this may begin to evaluate the pre-college level courses they need to take to enroll at the college level. Services provided through this pathways initiative include:

- Day, late afternoon and evening venues for ELA and Math MCAS preparation at community college sites;
- Accuplacer testing for college readiness;
- Access to developmental classes, English as a Second Language tutorials, study skills support;
- Career development services including: career interest and aptitude assessments, access to college career services, counseling and referrals to One Stop Career Centers for jobs; and
- Exposure to community college system and procedures.

Program Funding. To date, \$1,299,704 has been awarded for programming in the summers 2003 and 2004 (fund code 593) and 2003-2004 school year (fund code 598). Funding for summer programming (to both districts and community colleges) has been reduced by approximately 80 percent between 2003 and 2004.

Service Provider. Community colleges are the primary recipients of these grants, though during the summer of 2003, a few school districts and community-based organizations were service providers for these programs. In the Summer 2003, the Berkshires and Cape Cod received support for this work through an Innovative Programs grant.

Community Colleges Grants for Academic Support and Community College Transition Services

Institution	Summer 2003 (\$)	School Year 2003 -2004 (\$)	Summer 2004 (\$)	% Change Summer 2003 vs. 2004
Berkshire Community College	--	--	30,000	100
Bristol Community College	45,720	35,000	18,000	(61)
Bunker Hill Community College	68,580	57,000	18,000	(74)
Holyoke Community College	68,271	20,000	9,704	(86)
Massachusetts Bay Community College	42,644 ⁸	15,000	--	(100)
Massasoit Community College	60,960	20,000	15,000	(75)
Middlesex Community College	44,439	35,000	--	(100)
Mount Wachusett Community College	45,720	35,000	16,000	(65)
North Shore Community College	45,720	35,000	18,000	(61)
Quinsigamond Community College	38,100	--	--	(100)
Roxbury Community College	137,160	40,000	18,000	(87)
Springfield Tech. Community College	45,720	50,000	15,000	(67)
Total 593/598 Grants to Community Colleges	\$643,034	\$342,000	\$157,704	(75)

In addition to the 11 community colleges that received Academic Support and Community College Transition Services grants in summer of 2003, three school districts and two community-based agencies received, in combination, an additional \$156,966 in funding, bring the Summer 2003 grant total to \$800,000.

Students Served Academic Support and Community College Transition Services

	Summer 2003 ⁹	Fall 2003	Summer 2004
Program Capacity (#)	325	225	174 ¹⁰
Enrollment (#)	221	173 ¹¹	TBD
Students Completing Program (#)	159	131	TBD
Attrition (%)	28	24	TBD
Students Taking MCAS Retest (#)	TBD	44	TBD
Students Passing MCAS Retest (#)	TBD	21 (48%) ¹²	TBD

Strengthening a Pathways System for Students

The Commonwealth deserves recognition for its commitment to persevere in support of students, who have not yet earned a competency determination. In its first year, the state has been generally successful in creating a pathways system. Development of Massachusetts' pathways initiative was delayed for a number of reasons, including a statewide budget crisis and general lack of clarity about whether high stakes testing would survive political and legal challenges. Compounding this, the post-graduation release of the May 2003 retest results made it difficult to ascertain the actual number of students requiring ongoing academic support. As a result of these and other factors that delayed the conceptualization and implementation of a pathways system, the system that has been established is neither as strong, nor as comprehensive as it must be to effectively serve students who have not yet achieved the competency standard.

⁸ Massachusetts Bay did not run its program in the Summer of 2003 nor access its school year 2003-2004 award. (Source: DOE)

⁹ Numbers reported are based on only 10 of the 16 sites receiving funds. Additionally, only 15 of the original 16 grant recipients accessed the available funds and actually ran programs. (Source: DOE)

¹⁰ Capacity to serve 290 students based on request of \$268,600. Award was \$157,704, thus capacity was reduced by 40 percent. (Source: DOE)

¹¹ This number reflects the fall 2003 program enrollment as well as some students in the spring program. The DOE's final report in June 2004 will reflect additional enrollment. DOE expects additional enrollment of 25 to 50 students. (Source: DOE)

¹² Results of 3 students who took the November 2003 retest are unknown at this time. (Source: DOE)

If we, as a Commonwealth, are to fully live up to our commitment and accept responsibility for supporting *all* students to mastery, we must acknowledge that the development of effective pathways programming requires systemic reform and continued investment. To be truly effective, a pathways system must enable us to:

- Identify, recruit, and track students requiring academic support to achieve competency on MCAS;
- Provide effective, academically-focused pathways that enable all students to achieve MCAS mastery; and
- Evaluate the progress of specific programs, pathway initiatives, and the state's overall system for addressing needs of these students.

The Commonwealth has made progress toward addressing each of these areas, particularly in regards to funding pathway programs that provide academic support. Though the DOE cannot produce exact figures, we know that low enrollment and relatively high attrition resulted in the underutilization of available program capacity. In the future, more must be done by the state, districts, and service providers to ensure the students are made aware of available pathway options, are encouraged to participate, and are supported in persisting with their involvement. Currently, we have very little information about the effectiveness of individual programs and the state's overall pathways system. More must be done to evaluate program quality and the extent to which students across the state have equitable access to diverse pathway options. The remainder of this brief provides a deeper discussion and recommendations for building on current strengths of the Commonwealth's pathways system.

Improvements Already Implemented by the Department of Education

The Department of Education has moved forward on addressing some of these system-building objectives and expanding the current strengths of the *Alternative Pathways to Success* initiative launched in Spring 2003.

Significant steps that have improved the current status include:

- ***Rescheduling the Spring MCAS retest and release of retests results.*** Results from the May 2003 MCAS retest were not released until September 2003, thus it was hard for districts and pathway service providers to identify and recruit students requiring MCAS remediation. The DOE has improved this situation for the Class of 2004 by moving the Spring retest to March, thus enabling the pre-graduation release of retest results and eliminating the uncertainty that prevented some students from enrolling in pathways programs.
- ***Mandating programmatic evaluation and using this information to improve support mechanisms.*** In fulfillment of grant requirements, recipients must prepare final reports assessing the progress of their work. These evaluations include questions about student involvement in the program, student participation and performance on MCAS retests, identification of programmatic strengths and weaknesses, staffing quality and performance, and recommendations for future improvement. Once these evaluations are collated, DOE will be able to release their findings. In addition, these evaluations provide an opportunity for critical self-reflection and analysis at the programmatic level, enabling service providers to identify best practices and areas requiring further attention.
- ***Encouraging partnership and collaboration among service providers.*** The DOE has increasingly encouraged collaboration among service providers as they design and implement pathways programming. Grant applicants are strongly encouraged to work with other community agencies and are informed that preference will be given to proposals involving collaboration. As a result, program offerings are streamlined, and students benefit from coordinated pathways that address broader support requirements.

Opportunities for Strengthening the Pathways System

To supplement our understanding of opportunities and obstacles impacting the development of a systemic pathways initiative, we conducted approximately ten confidential interviews with education experts and pathways program providers from each of the initiative areas described in the prior section. Though we interviewed a small number of people, we attempted to include voices representing different regions across the state and a diverse group of service providers. In these conversations, we asked for feedback on their experience, including perceived progress and obstacles encountered during provision of post-graduation academic support. In addition, we reviewed a series of program summary evaluations that were provided to us by the DOE. These summaries provided relevant information on the program strengths, weaknesses, and lessons learned by a range of service providers. In response to these conversations, we have developed a set of recommendations that highlight opportunities for state- and district-level leaders to work towards strengthening a pathways system for students in Massachusetts.

1. Identifying, recruiting, and tracking students requiring MCAS remediation

Numerous factors impede the identification, recruitment, and ongoing tracking of populations in need of pathways programming. These challenges are identified below along with recommendations for improving systemic and effective program planning, resource allocation and service provision.

State-Level Recommendations

- ***Implement a statewide system for tracking students who have not earned a competency determination.*** Service providers and district staff cited extreme difficulty with locating and tracking students who failed to graduate once the summer began. Currently, the DOE is only able to use October 1st reports to track students who are formally enrolled within a district's public school system. Consequently, there is no systemic way for either districts or the state to track the progress or whereabouts of students who fail to earn a competency determination prior to graduation unless they enroll for a 13th year. Similarly, no system exists to track the progress and location of mobile students, who also may be in need on ongoing academic services but have moved between districts or have dropped out of school. We acknowledge the challenge inherent in locating mobile students, many of whom may live in poverty between multiple homes and have telephone numbers frequently changed or disconnected. However, the creation, maintenance, and staffing of a statewide tracking system must occur if we are to have any chance of locating and supporting all students to mastery.
- ***Speed MCAS retest scoring to minimize the transitional lag encountered by post-graduation test-takers.*** While a March retest enables students, families, pathways providers, and district staff to be better informed and able to plan summer programming, the two-month lag between test taking and test score release remains problematic for students taking the Summer and Fall MCAS retests. Respondents noted that because many students believe (often mistakenly) that they have passed the retest, they prefer to wait for their results rather than enrolling in another session of support services. Two months later, when results are released, pathways providers are often unable to locate and re-enroll students in follow-up programming. By speeding the release of retest scores, this problem would be minimized and student recruitment would be more viable.
- ***Maintain consistent classification of students enrolled for each graduating class.*** The Department of Education has reclassified 1,248 students who were enrolled as seniors in the Class of 2003 as members of the Class of 2004. While districts and the DOE must validly track the number of students receiving services at the district level, this reclassification further complicates cohort analysis and the capacity to accurately assess the proportion of students from each graduating class who have achieved their competency determination.
- ***Clarify districts' roles and responsibilities for providing pathways support.*** The state needs to clarify the district's roles and responsibilities regarding provision of post-graduation pathway services. This will require defining the scope of services (e.g., student tracking, academic support, recruitment, and 13th year services) that the district must provide and the length of time that these services must be provided for each graduating class. Clarifying districts' participation will also enable better define their accountability for student success.

District-Level Recommendations

- ***Continue to diversify and develop outreach and recruitment processes.*** Respondents had trouble convincing students that pathways options were available. Local districts and service providers must develop better outreach strategies to improve this situation. As the primary point of contact for students, district high schools are best positioned to accurately identify students in need on ongoing pathways programming. Thus, these high schools, and especially their guidance counselors must take the lead in the pathways outreach and recruitment process while students are still enrolled in school. Outreach must be initiated early in the school year and the diversity of available options must be clearly articulated to students and families. Respondents cited outreach success when multiple points of entry were used to communicate alternatives, including: different media outlets (print, mailings, advertisements, radio, community newsletters, newspapers, talk show, fliers), faith-based organizations, parent advisor counsels, and recruitment kiosks in shopping malls. Partnerships with the district, community colleges, and community agencies were also leveraged to reach students. Emphasis on multi-lingual and culturally sensitive outreach is also critical. Respondents recommended utilizing pathways "alumni" as ambassador-links to help with outreach for future classes through peer modeling and counseling.
- ***Enhance communication between districts, community agencies, and community colleges.*** Respondents noted that pathways service providers depend on districts to provide tracking information about students. While some districts are cited as effectively sharing this information, others were described as being less helpful. While it is unclear why some districts were less willing and/or able to provide student information, districts must be encouraged to do so and be supported by the state in their efforts. Efforts must be made to clarify the full extent of cooperation that is required and the process by which it occurs.

- ***Hire staff dedicated to pathways outreach and counseling.*** If districts are to be responsible for outreach to pathways students, then dedicated district-level staff members are required to focus exclusively on identification, recruitment, tracking, and retention of students needing pathways programming support. While general guidance counselors and school-level career specialists play a large part in linking students with appropriate services, dedicated pathways staff is required to focus on building the necessary personal relationships with students and their families that ultimately leads to their awareness, enrollment, and retention within pathways programs. Though hiring high-quality, dedicated outreach staff is expensive, investment in bilingual, culturally-sensitive pathways coordinators has been cited as essential.

2. Provide coordinated, pathways to enable mastery of the competency standard

Both the DOE and service providers emphasize the need for better collaboration and partnership among service providers to provide students with more comprehensive, ongoing academic supports. Recommendations below suggest focused areas in which improvements can be made.

- ***Improve communication and collaboration between service providers.*** In the future, service providers must improve their communication and collaboration to better serve students. Collaboration should focus on matching students with appropriate program options; communicating about students' academic needs, conducting outreach and recruitment, and enrolling and retaining students within programs.
- ***Provide support for transitional services.*** Respondents cited the main challenge as their inability to identify, recruit, enroll, and retain students in ongoing, coordinated pathways programs. Because there are gaps in service and student contact when one program ends and another begins (e.g., summer and school year program cycles), students are often "lost" and cannot be tracked if they lose motivation and withdraw from pathways initiatives. When seniors leave the high school, they are also at risk of "disappearing" if guidance staff has not been hired to maintain contact with them. In both cases, disruption could be minimized by transitional services that enable pathways providers to maintain ongoing contact with students. For example, transitional services might involve hiring dedicated staff (whose costs might be shared by multiple service providers) to work with, encourage, and track students as they move from one pathways program to another. In other instances, transitional services might entail providing ongoing academic support to bridge the time lag between programs.
- ***Increase flexibility around timeframe for grant expenditure to enable provision of transitional services.*** Respondents cited pressure to spend all grant funding within a set period of time, rather than in a flexible manner that would enhance the effectiveness of their program offerings. Specifically, some respondents noted that they would prefer to use portions of their awards to bridge services between the Summer and School Year programs. If Summer programs were allowed to spend their funds through mid-October and School Year programs could spend their funds beginning in late summer, the two programs could hire shared transitional staff and/or provide overlapping program support to students who would be enrolled in both Summer and Fall programs. Some respondents stated that this enhanced flexibility and continuity of service would decrease program attrition levels. To reinforce their emphasis on collaboration, the DOE should consider adopting more flexible grant guidelines, allowing recipients to spend funds in a less restricted timeframe.
- ***Extend length of Summer program grants to enable more effective MCAS test preparation.*** On a related note, respondents noted challenges with the short turn-around time between graduation in June and the July retest, claiming that there was insufficient time to adequately prepare students for the Summer retest. Because Summer grants must be spent by August 31st, students have the following options: a) taking a test for which they may not be prepared, and forfeiting their opportunity to take the November retest; or b) waiting until November to take the retest, but experiencing a gap in MCAS support services between the conclusion of the Summer program in July and the start of the School Year program in September. If Summer programs could span part of September, service providers could offer more comprehensive remediation services, and students would have more time to prepare without being forced to take a retest before they felt ready.
- ***Coordinate pathways programming grant cycle with MCAS testing schedule.*** Respondents noted that the current grant cycle is not aligned with the MCAS testing schedule, thus impeding effective program planning, student recruitment, and program delivery. The DOE's decision to shift the Spring MCAS retest schedule, has alleviated some of these challenges, but the problem still exists. Under the current schedule, service providers have had to design programs and apply for grants before actually being able to identify the actual scope of need and target students. Some respondents said they have been unable to initiate early outreach and enrollment of students because award notification was late; other respondents did not share this opinion. To minimize this potential obstacle, the DOE might consider coordinating the current grant cycle (RFP notification, proposal due dates, award notifications, and funding delivery) to coordinate with the academic year cycle and MCAS testing schedule (retest dates and retest result releases).

3. Evaluate the success of the Commonwealth's pathways program system

June 2004 marks the one-year inception of the Commonwealth's *Alternate Pathways to Success* initiative. As policymakers and education leaders consider the effectiveness of Massachusetts' pathways policy and next steps in its continued development, they must comprehensively evaluate the extent to which its original goal was accomplished – *supporting all students to mastery*. The DOE has begun this process by requiring all grant recipients to complete summary project evaluations that provide concrete data on the number of students served, their progress on the MCAS, strengths and weaknesses of the program, and lessons learned to inform future work. The DOE is collecting and reviewing grant recipients' summary program reports. This information, once fully compiled and publicly released will provide significant insight on progress made and challenges that must be addressed to improve pathways options for the Class of 2003 and future graduating classes.

To stimulate further policy discourse about desired goals and outcomes for the pathways initiative, we have outlined a broad set of evaluation areas that we believe should be central to decision-making about pathways system-building.

- ***Evaluate effectiveness of different pathways initiatives and impact of specific programming strategies.***
The Commonwealth must dedicate funding and staff to evaluate the effectiveness of the three primary pathways initiatives and the relative impact that each has had on increasing the number of students earning competency determinations and pursuing further education. To do so, the Commonwealth must define a set of assessment guidelines to measure "effectiveness" and "success". These indicators might include: program capacity/enrollment ratios, attrition rates, MCAS test-taking rates and ratios of MCAS test-taking against pass rates. This type of evaluation will enable policymakers and the DOE to focus funding on the most effective pathway models. Comprehensive evaluation will help to identify best practices and less effective strategies – lessons that should be communicated to other service providers in the field.
- ***Analyze extent to which students across the state can equitably access diverse pathways options.***
Enhanced student tracking will enable the Commonwealth to clarify the actual size, geographic breakdown, and academic background of the student population requiring ongoing support services. With this information, policymakers and educational leaders will be better equipped to proportionally allocate funding to communities on the basis of their need. To ensure that Massachusetts' regions and local communities are provided equal access to all of the different pathways programs, funding allocations must be correlated with the scope of student need. Similarly, the extent to which pathways programs are responsive to individual students' academic needs must be assessed, thus ensuring that appropriate levels of ESL and special education services are made available.

Conclusion

The Rennie Center has compiled this policy brief in order to focus the educational policy community, once again, on the Commonwealth's obligation to provide continuing academic services to those students who are unable to graduate because of their failure on the MCAS. The Department of Education, many community colleges, the employment and training system, some community based organizations, public high schools, and others have all worked to meet this challenge during the course of the past year. While we commend all parties on their contribution to the development of a genuine "pathways" system to serve the needs of those who have yet to meet state standards, we have begun to identify ways in which this system requires improvement.

We need more data on eligible students, more program evaluation, a student tracking system, more alignment of services and needs, more coordination of resources, program and providers, greater clarification of roles and responsibilities of various providers, better alignment between existing needs and the availability of services in regions throughout the state and better communication on available services, particularly to eligible students and the counselors who advise them. We have recommended a variety of areas for investment and improvement that would enhance the current pathways system, but in the end, the success of these programs will depend upon students' willingness to persist in their quest for a diploma, while the Commonwealth supports them in doing so.

The summer of 2003 was the first time that the Commonwealth needed a "safety net", "pathways" program for students. The Commonwealth has made a good start at creating such a system but more work remains to be done if Massachusetts is to fulfill its obligation, implicit in the adoption of state standards and assessments, to provide academic support to all students for as long as they need it to attain mastery of the standards. This is the promise of education reform.

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The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the authors, their advisors, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, or MassINC staff and board members.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge with thanks the many people who provided support during the preparation of this document. We owe a debt of gratitude to staff at the Department of Education – in particular, Rachelle Engler, Keith Westrich, and Martha Hass for their help in providing data on pathways programs funded through the Department’s Academic Support Unit. We wish to thank Rachel Becker, a graduate student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education for her help with interviews and feedback on the content of this policy brief. We thank Andy Calkins of Mass Insight Education for his help, and we acknowledge the impact that Mass Insight Education’s *Keeping the Promise* initiative has had on the development of this brief. We also wish to acknowledge and thank the many educators and pathways program leaders, whom we confidentially interviewed, for their valuable feedback and insights on the strengths and challenges of the task at hand. Despite their busy schedules, they gave freely of their time to share thoughts about their experiences.

The PDF version of this policy brief contains some minor editorial changes differing from the printed version.



Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy at MassINC

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